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AUTHOR Madden, D.; Laurence, D.
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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether college students' writing skills have deteriorated in recent years. Writing samples from upper-level undergraduate or first-year graduate courses from 1956 (at a public university), 1965 (at a private university), and from 1978 and 1993 (at a private college) were examined. Samples were analyzed for errors in spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation as well as for style. Results indicated that college students' writing ability has declined. Findings suggest that this decline in writing skills and the debate about how and where to offer instruction must end; otherwise, there may be no one left who has enough knowledge of the structure of the English language and sufficient writing skills to provide the necessary instruction and guidance to reverse the trend. (Two charts of data are included; 17 references are attached.) (Author/RS)

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An Examination of College Writing Skills: Have They Deteriorated?

D. Madden, D. Laurence

Baldwin-Wallace College

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Running head: COLLEGE WRITING SKILLS

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Abstract

The level of writing skills among college students is a current matter of concern for college personnel. Writing samples from upper level undergraduate or first year graduate courses from 1956, 1978, and 1993 were compared to determine whether there has been a deterioration in the writing skill level of college students. Samples were analyzed for errors in spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation as well as for style. The results indicate that there has been a decline in ability. Implications for college eduators are discussed.

An Examination of College Writing Skills: Have They Deteriorated?

Whenever college and university personnel gather, several topics consistently surface as common areas of concern. One of those is the apparent decrease in the level of writing skills in the student population. Although some consensus occurs in that area, why the deterioration exists and exactly what specific characteristics may be involved is more difficult to answer.

Shea (1993) discussed the aforementioned issues with several English professors from various universities. Many comments tended to be subjective. For example, some indicated that there are the same number of "mediocre" writers but the problem seems to be different. Others referred to the high school emphasis of helping students to develop an individualistic style. However, most were more specific about problems. For example: 1) a lack of command of the English language seems to be present, something that was generally assumed could be corrected over a period of time; 2) a drop in technical knowledge, such as agreement between nouns and verbs; 3) other grammatical errors to which students pay little attention; 4) inability to construct sentences and arguments; and, 5) a tendency towards looking at the shallowness of a problem with the general attitude that if an opinion is held by a student, it is right, and if an example is given to support an argument, it is right.

As for the evidence of deterioration over the past twenty

years, Shea offered some facts. For example, in 1992, 11.4% of the 1,022,820 students, or 116,630 taking the SAT verbal section scored over 600. In contrast, in 1992 only 7.3% of the 1,034,131 or 75,243 scored at that level.

What are some possible reasons for this drop? One may be found in the reference to a different concept in grammar usage and study presented by Norm Chomsky (Sanborn, 1986). Chomsky questioned the necessity for teaching correctness, but rather indicated one should learn the difference between two characteristics of grammar: 1) performance, which should be classified as acceptability; and 2) usage, which referred to grammatical correctness and competence.

For performance, emphasis is placed on the language of the environment. As long as the meaning of the utterance is understood, the structure need not be altered. For example, "Him and me have went to lots of ball games" is acceptable, but "Him ball game me lots of have went" is not, as it demonstrates a lack of established clarity. In support of this, Warner (1993) indicated that phrases such as "He don't" and "I seen" may be appropriate and probably should not be corrected so not to seem elitist.

For usage, grammatical correctness is the major factor demonstrating competence in learning differences, which raises the question as to the appropriateness of teaching grammar, based on the first item. To this, an early issue raised was, if grammar is to be taught, when should it be done? Warner (1993) pointed out

that if a college educated individual cannot identify grammar problems, how can a student at a much lower level be expected to be competent at that task? Arguments appeared on both sides. On the one hand, Vygotsky (1978) felt that grammar should be continued because that field of study was of "paramount importance for the mental development of the child". Later Vavra (1987) supported this notion but added that perhaps traditional instruction may be somewhat useless. Reasons suggested were that there has been a cultural shift as many students would rather watch television than read, or use the phone rather than write. For this reason, texts seem to be less valid. In addition, it has been suggested that the use of word processors has had an effect on the deterioration as well as teaching methods used (Shea, 1993). Vavra (1987) went on to suggest that much can be benefitted if a student learns to study personal work as writing develops. However an instructor is not only necessary but that individual can serve as a guide for study, thus aiding in the development of concept in that once an idea is formed, this can be assimilated and grasped.

On the other side, others have felt that teaching grammar is a dead issue, referring to it as a series of boring, repetitious drill, and that only the nature of language should be taught (English Journal Focus, 1987). At the same time Hudson (1987) after surveying an undisclosed number of English teachers and eighth grade students found that less than 30% teach language arts as it was considered a learning task too difficult for the students. Based on that, the eight graders either refused to carry

out the lessons or performed incorrectly.

In the same survey, the following progressions were noted using the Piagetian scale:

1) 35% at the concrete operations level - age range 7 - 11, during which rational and logical thought processes are developed which are applied to real objects or experiences, but this logic cannot be applied to abstract or hypothetical problems;

2) 50% at the level of typical middle school students, perhaps somewhere in between the previous group and the following; and,

3) 14% at the formal operations level, the greatest level of development at which point logic can be applied to all types of problems including abstract and hypothetical, with no more reliance on the concrete (Schramberg, 1985).

On a more substantive level, Hudson (1987) found that:

1) 85% could not identify subject and verb phrases in 9 sentences from a current grammar test;

2) 74% failed to achieve a score of 60% on a "typical" middle grade test; and,

3) 47% failed the test which was at the formal operational level.

Interestingly enough, students at all levels of functioning were found to have as high as 130 I.Q., and 42% of the subjects who had an I.Q. of 114 failed the test. One comparison made showed that students who performed well on the grammar test were the same that did well in algebra. Final conclusions drawn from that were

that it is necessary to achieve a level of formal reasoning to better understand grammatical tasks.

Based on the above information, it becomes important to determine if a deterioration in writing skills can be quantified at the college or university level.

Method

To look at writing skills, student papers were retrieved from old files dating from 1956, 1965, and 1978 and were compared to those of 1993. Institutions from which the samples were taken included one public university (1956), one private university (1965), and one private college (1978 and 1993).

Classes from which these papers were obtained had the following characteristics:

1) Samples from 1956, 1978, and 1993 were done by students enrolled in an upper level undergraduate seminar; those from 1965 were obtained from a first semester Master's level seminar. For this reason, the latter group might be expected to be at a slightly higher level because the students had been admitted for graduate study.

2) Each class had the same requirements. Students were asked to select an area of interest and prepare abstracts from the professional literature, each of which included: a) citation; b) purpose; c) method; d) results; and e) student criticism of the article. Only the latter was used in the evaluation as it was felt this was a more accurate representation of the student writing and less apt to be influenced by writing style of the author.

3) For the 1993 samples, 41 were completed on a word processor (Group I) and 8 were handwritten (Group II). The 1993 students were also asked to submit a one paragraph spontaneous writing sample (Group III).

Specific characteristics compared from the samples were numbers of:

sentences per paragraph

words per sentence

number of words per paragraph

number of different words

number of letters per word

In addition, the following numbers of specific errors in the samples were contrasted:

spelling

vocabulary

grammar

punctuation

use of passive voice

style (as defined by Grammatik III).

Results

Frequencies and means were used as measurement of possible differences except the latter with lower numbers equalling informal higher to formal. In addition, a two-tailed T test was used to determine significance between each of the earlier groups and the 1993 samples as well as the three 1993 groups. It should be noted, however, that because of the small samples, no attempt is being

made to assume at this time the results should be generalized to other populations. Frequencies, means, and T test results are shown in the charts below.

MEANS

	1956	1965	1978	1993					
				Group I*		II*		III*	
	N=7	N=9	N=15	N=41		N=8		N=39	
Characteristics/Means				Range		Range		Range	
#sentences/pp	3.57	3.56	2.67	3.1	1-11	31.0	1-4	4.2	1-4
#words/sentence	20.76	22.17	16.85	18.56	10-37	15.84	11-28	14.61	11-28
#words in pp	74.00	74.44	43.93	66.80	23-93	44.12	28-64	51.44	28-64
#different words	58.29	56.67	36.13	52.56	22-129	34.75	24-52	44.56	24-52
#letters per word	5.08	5.26	4.92	5.03	4-5	4.96	57-56	4.47	4-5
Errors/Means per sample									
Spelling	.00	.33	.13	.15	0-1	.13	0	.34	0-4
Vocabulary	.00	.22	.00	.10	0-2	.25	0-1	.34	0-1
Grammar	.43	.56	.13	.44	0-2	.50	0-2	.35	0-2
Punctuation	.00	1.00	.27	.18	0-1	.37	0-1	.32	0-2
passive verbs	.71	1.00	.47	.74	0-3	1.00	0-2	.54	0-2
style	1.29	1.00	.47	.74	0-2	.50	0-2	.41	0-2

Statistical Comparisons using T=test and 2 tail probability

Characteristics	56/93III	65/93III	78/93III	I to II	I to III
#sent. in pp.	.36	.53	.57	.41	.01
#words in sent.	.05	.03	.67	.001	.001
#words in pp.	.02	.10	.98	.874	.15
#different words	.01	.05	.82	.959	.10
#letters per word	.46	.47	.82	.000	1000
Errors per sample	**56/93III**	**65/93III**	**78/93III**	**I to II**	**I to III**
Sp. errors	.35	.45	.96	.09	.12
Voc. errors	.17	.92	.17	.68	.05
grammatical errors	.86	.24	.23	.81	.76
punctuation	.08	.08	.68	.81	.76
passive verbs	.52	1.00	.18	.61	.27
style(formal/infor)	.15	.22	.92	.01	.06

*Group I= Electronic Group II= Handwritten Group III= Spontaneous

There are several observations that can be made from this data:

1. Although the numbers of sentences in the samples remained fairly constant, differences showed up at a steady decline between the numbers of words in a sentence and numbers of different words, indicating that shorter sentences and less varied vocabulary are currently being used.
2. Although letters per word did not show a large numerical decline, when compared to the other characteristics, one might assume that the vocabulary became more simplistic.
3. In almost every area, the comparison between Group III 1993 is notable and statistically significant. There are less differences between the handwritten critiques and the electronically prepared than between the spontaneous and the electronically prepared. Students, without the time to rewrite, demonstrate the highest rate of error.
4. Statistics for the electronically prepared group of 1993, although closest to the earlier samples, still indicate that there is a difference.
5. Style became increasingly less formal, with only the electronically prepared 1993 samples tending towards the more formal writing of earlier years.

Discussion

If one agrees with information presented in the literature, it can be assumed that there exists a predictable decline in writing skills in the college age population. In the samples compared in this study, there seems to be no question that deterioration has

and continues to occur. Perhaps the reliance students now place on computers and word processors to make writing more professional may be accomplishing that goal at the price of creating a greater spontaneous performance gap. Even colleagues in English such as Warner (1993) concluded that although some teaching methods may be inappropriate, if "teaching grammar" helps students master "standard American English, we have an obligation to teach it".

Since college personnel from many institutions are expressing concern over this problem, is there an awareness problem on the part of faculty as to specifics? Vavra (1993) noted that there is an "ignorance of natural syntactic development (which) permeates in the English curriculum" and added "getting students to use specifics ia a major problem area at the college level".

Perhaps, however, academia has placed too much of the blame and responsibility on English departments. In remarking on the fact or actions of professors in other disciplines, one English professor commented that "when a faculty member sends her a copy of a badly written paper, that paper has an A of A- on it, and no comments" (Shea, 1993).

Before assuming that the English instructors have not tried to meet the demand, one should consider these facts. Whereas, in the mid 1960's, 16 people could be teaching freshmen English, today 70 -77 teaching assistants handle 2,000 students (Shea, 1993). Because of the apparent deterioration, what used to be remedial is now big business and that same intensive course in expository writing is like one formerly reserved for poor writers.

Finally, one must ask what effect this trend has had on the professional world beyond the collegiate level. As Graver (1985) put it, "learning how to write well is the acquisition of equipment without which the moral life is incomplete". In support of this notion, Johnson, et. al. (1993), to determine the moral reasoning of individuals in decisions which required writing, had written assignments of 72 undergraduates evaluated and scored by two "experienced evaluators". Included were : 1) mechanics such as grammar and punctuation; 2) completeness; 3)tone; and, 4) design. Samples were from an assignment in which students wrote two in class and two out of class letters as well as an in class report. For purposes of this study reasoning ability was defined as being able to rationally examine different aspects of a problem and arrive at a sensible solution. Moral reasoning, on the other hand, was used to determine what is just and right in making decisions. Data collected on the subjects depicted a population that was widely varied in background, major, income, race, sex, and age. The conclusion reached shows there is a direct link between moral reasoning and writing ability.

If the aforementioned results were found in a broader population, one might place higher value on the need to improve writing skills among the young in America. That not withstanding, there is a decline and the debates about how and where to offer instruction must end. Otherwise, there may come a time when, if a power failure occurs, people running our major corporations and government agencies may not be able to produce a coherent document.

In fact, at that point the question that may need to be answered is will there be anyone left who has enough knowledge of the structure of the English language and sufficient writing skills to provide the necessary instruction and guidance to reverse the trend?

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